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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 006823

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [PTER](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: USE OF FORCE IN MA'AN ASSERTS GOJ AUTHORITY, BUT
LEAVES A BAD TASTE

REF: A. AMMAN 6535

[1](#)B. AMMAN 6650

Classified By: Amb. Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (B) and (D)

MA'AN OPERATION ONLY A PARTIAL SUCCESS...

[1](#)1. (S) The winding down but not quite completed security operation in Ma'an against Islamic militant leader Mohammed Shalibi (aka Abu Sayyaf - refs) has been a decidedly unsatisfying operation from the standpoint of most Jordanians. For the government and its staunch supporters, the week-long operation clearly demonstrated government resolve not to permit an armed group to challenge its authority, led to the confiscation of some explosives and heavy weapons, and broke up a group that might have used them. It may in the short term reduce the incidents of gangsterism committed by Abu Sayyaf's group in Ma'an, acts often carried out in the name of an extremist Islam at odds with the moderate beliefs of most Jordanians (although tolerated by most Ma'anis). However, the operation did not lead to the arrest of Abu Sayyaf, and netted only a few of his supporters. It also cost at least five lives, two of the dead policemen involved in the operation. Some young members of the dead policemen's tribe allegedly blamed the government for putting their kinsmen into a dangerous situation, and attacked a police station in a village near the city of Kerak. (Leaders of the tribe subsequently declared the policemen martyrs and reaffirmed the tribe's loyalty to King and country). Perhaps most seriously, the militants killed in the operation could become martyrs.

... AND LEAVES A BAD TASTE

[1](#)2. (S) From the standpoint of the citizens of Ma'an, a semblance of order has been restored, and an armed group that had previously attacked a police station, taken over the hospital, and vandalized the women's dormitory at the local university has at least been pushed into hiding. In addition, a November 17 visit to Ma'an of five Ministers, and the announcement of a modest increase in money for Ma'an development projects, indicates that the city could get greater government attention and support. (The announced program amounts to quick fixes, but longer-term projects in the planning stages, such as irrigation and waste disposal, may help over time. The government has not shown much interest, though, in addressing the Ma'anis' firm conviction that they are not getting their fair share of water.)

[1](#)3. (S) However, Ma'anis were forced to endure a week of siege, closed schools and businesses, and house to house searches. Furthermore, contacts in Ma'an indicate that many in the city consider Abu Sayyaf -- a former government Imam who was fired because of his fiery mosque sermons -- to be a devout Muslim who incurred the wrath of the government by publicizing official corruption. Foreign correspondents who were taken into Ma'an earlier this week -- as well as embassy contacts with connections to Ma'an -- report many expressions of local anger over the government's use of force. Outside of Ma'an, many Jordanians question the timing of the operation, variously tying the raid to a perceived need to show the U.S. that the GOJ is moving against Islamic militants, working hard to catch the killers of Larry Foley, or demonstrating that it will not tolerate public disorder as violence in the West Bank escalates and a war in Iraq looms.

[1](#)4. (S) Many contacts applaud the government's goal in Ma'an -- getting rid of an armed band that thought itself above the law -- but fault its tactics. The Ma'an and Amman rumor mills are rife with unflattering (and unconfirmed) stories of bad conduct by police and security forces during the Ma'an operation. Families of arrested militants have accused security forces of looting their houses of jewelry and other valuables during the searches. "Eyewitnesses" from Ma'an swear that they saw Jordanian army helicopters firing missiles into houses held by militants. Even though this allegation is probably not true, it conjures up for most Jordanians images of Israeli helicopters attacking Palestinian cities in the West Bank and Gaza. That a significant number of Jordanians are describing the Ma'an

operation in these terms should be of concern to the government.

15. (S) We note that, despite these widespread but vague rumors of excesses, we have not heard allegations that non-militants were targeted, injured or killed. One independent observer who was allowed to tour the city freely on November 18 scoffed at rumors of "war damage" to Ma'an. He found evidence of gunfights, but nothing to support the stories about widespread destruction, much less government use of missiles or heavy weapons. Although press reports indicate that the government has referred sixty-six individuals rounded up in Ma'an to the State Security Court for possible prosecution, the government quickly released a number of others -- including non-Jordanians -- who had no connection to Abu Sayyaf. The short detention of the local correspondent for al-Jazeera and one of his relatives may have contributed to the largely negative coverage of events in Ma'an on the pan-Arab media.

DID THE GOJ HAVE ANY OTHER CHOICE?

16. (S) Several GOJ officials have argued to us that the resort to force in Ma'an was certainly not ideal, but was forced on the government by the militants. Abu Sayyaf and his group posed a direct and armed challenge to government authority in Ma'an -- the group possessed heavy weapons and explosives, engaged in a gun battle with police to gain Abu Sayyaf's release, commandeered a local hospital at gunpoint to secure him medical treatment, and Abu Sayyaf made public statements that he would not submit to the illegitimate government authorities without a fight. With a well-armed and defiant Abu Sayyaf gang essentially running free in Ma'an, the government was put in the unenviable position of having to consider the use of force against some of its own citizens. Abu Sayyaf's direct public challenge to royal authority -- a slap at the honor of the King -- virtually assured that the government would take some action.

17. (S) Jordanians outside of Ma'an express little sympathy for Abu Sayyaf's Islamic militants, and the militants' message of armed resistance to the government does not seem to be resonating in other parts of the country. Most recognize that they were an armed gang that had challenged governmental authority and Jordan's stability.

18. (S) Conversely, however, most Jordanians are not comfortable with the government's use of force. Many Jordanians would have preferred that the government put more time and energy into pressing local leaders to come up with a proper "tribal" solution, one that would have resulted in a reaffirmation of government authority, and custody and trial of Abu Sayyaf and his lieutenants, but would have avoided laying siege to Ma'an. Several sources indicate that the anger of many Ma'anis is being specifically directed against the King by name -- a likely formula for further trouble, since the security forces will not stand for open disloyalty. However, since the message of the militants is not spreading outside of Ma'an, Jordanians are likely to see this episode -- like bread and gas price riots in 1989 and 1996 -- as just another sad chapter in the history of Jordan's most politically volatile city.

GNEHM